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SUBJECT: FERMENT IN CUBAN MASONIC MOVEMENT

Classified By: COM Michael E. Parmly; Reasons 1.4 (b/d)

11. (C) At the instigation of former Cuban Masonic Grand Master Jose Manuel Collera Vento, the current Cuban Grand Lodge issued a decree recently that dissolves the Masonic Supreme Court, ostensibly for mishandling a misconduct case. Members of at least one regular lodge have formally requested that this decree be revoked, setting up a test of wills between Collera Vento, probably a GOC pawn, and the rank and file of the Masonic movement.

BACKGROUND:

12. (C) Jose Manuel Collera Vento is a high-ranking official of the Cuban freemason movement and a former Grand Master. The current Grand Master is Osmundo Cabrera Perez. The movement nationwide has over 25,000 members and follows "regular" Masonic traditions that unabashedly trace their lineage to England and to American independence leaders. Current Cuban lodges are named after Ben Franklin, George Washington and Abraham Lincoln, for example. Cuba's own independence leaders Jose Marti, Antonio Maceo and Calixto Garcia were also freemasons. Masonic buildings and activities are funded out of membership dues and assistance from overseas. The main Masonic building in Central Havana, which once was modern enough, in pre-Castro Cuba, to have IBM as one of its tenants, has deteriorated terribly and deliberately under the Castro dictatorship. Real estate aside, however, as an organization, the freemasons still mean something to key sectors of Cuban society.

13. (C) USINT-Officer, an honorary member of "Logia Habana," has seen considerable e-mail exchange on the subject of the Supreme Court's dissolution, which a senior freemason (Gustavo Pardo - please protect) told him reaches roughly 100 members nationwide with internet access. Pardo was confident that the 100 on-line would get the word around to most of the other 25,000, either by word of mouth or printouts and circulation of hard-copies. According to Pardo and other members of Logia Habana, the edict by the Grand Master was/is unconstitutional, and violates the Masonic separation of powers.

14. (C) Collera Vento, according to these same sources, is the instigator of this conflict, and would benefit from it personally if the Supreme Court's dissolution is upheld. One of the cases to be dismissed by the Supreme court involves his own misconduct, specifically, freelancing and mis-using funds while traveling abroad on Masonic business. Some of

that travel was to the USA, where USINT believes Collera Vento was seeking financial support under false pretenses, while more likely acting under instructions from the Castro regime to penetrate, weaken, and divide the Masonic movement.

When we learned about Collera Vento's activities, we recommended that his more recent application for a visa be denied.

Comment:

15. (C) It is possible that some of this conflict is a consequence of the regime's and Collera Vento's pique over the visa denial -- which proves that the denial was the right decision. The next number of months, while this plays out, will be important for Cuba's Masonic movement. Although, like the Church, it is hobbled by regime restrictions, surveillance, and penetration, it still provides something of a neutral space to allow Cubans to participate in civil society in a largely volunteerist and apolitical context. There are no photographs of Fidel or Raul Castro inside the Masonic temples, and inspirational quotes tend to come from Jose Marti, or other non-communist figures, like Winston Churchill, or Ben Franklin. The very debate inside the Masonic movement regarding the Grand Master's abuse of authority, and separation of powers, has obvious parallels to Cuba as a whole, points that are not lost on the members, even if they have to discuss them in code. For all these reasons, USINT and Miami-based donors have supported the freemason movement in the past and should continue to do so.
PARMLY